

A Native American man, likely of the Powhatan tribe, is shown from the chest up. He wears a large, light-colored feathered headdress with a blue and white geometric patterned band. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right. He wears a tan, fringed garment over a beaded necklace with a large, circular, light-colored pendant. He is holding a wooden staff or tool in his right hand. The background is a lush green field with various wildflowers and tall grasses, with a dense forest of evergreen trees in the distance.

Thousands Of Years Before

the first settlers arrived in Jamestown, Native Americans were creating and developing farming techniques. From crop rotation to cross pollination, aquatic farming, to natural resource conservation, the first Virginian's set an agricultural path that has lasted centuries and has formed the basis from which we farm today.

The Beginning of Virginia Agriculture

When seeds gathered for food were accidentally scattered around their campground, Native Americans discovered that harvesting the plants was easier the next season, and so began agriculture in Virginia.

About 4,000 years ago, in the Woodland period, Eastern North American Indians domesticated four native plants; squash, sunflower, sumpweed, and goosefoot. In time, knotweed, maygrass, and “little barley” were added to the list. Although these wild plants were the beginning of agriculture in Virginia, they provided a very limited source of nourishment. Native Americans continued to rely on nomadic hunting and gathering for survival. At this time the population remained thin because the food supply was unreliable.

Eventually, Southwest and Mexican explorers, playing an integral role in Virginia agriculture, introduced a different variety of squash (early pumpkins rather than the earlier varieties of modern acorn/summer squash), beans, and corn cultivation. The variety of corn adapted to the short growing season in Virginia (as opposed to

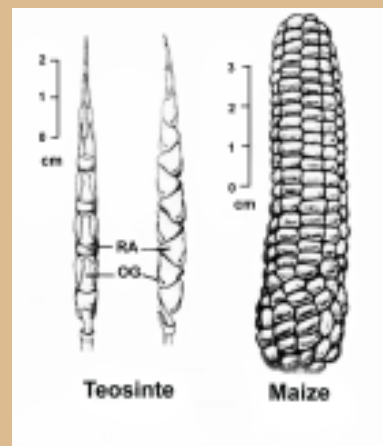
corn’s native habitat in Mexico) promoted a stable food supply and stimulated a population explosion in the Mississippi Valley. Even with a stabilized food supply, Native Americans realized that a nomadic way of life improved soil conditions, prevented over-harvesting of aquatic life, and reduced the risk of disease. They continued to live nomadically for several thousand years.

By systematically collecting and cultivating different plants, Native Americans produced crops suited for their climate and lifestyle. When Europeans arrived in the 16th and 17th century, they found an established agricultural system that included corn, melons, beans, squash, and tobacco. Out of these crops, corn and tobacco became the most pivotal to Virginia history. Corn was the most sought after grain of the colonists and was used by Native Americans as a major bartering tool. Through tobacco, Virginia Natives helped form the economic basis of the first successful English colony in North America.



Lobelia Inflata or “Indian Tobacco”

The History of Corn



Corn is a domesticated form of teosinte, a wild grass found in isolated patches in the Mexican western Sierra Madre. This early corn looked very different than today’s corn in that the kernels were small and individually covered by their own floral parts (similar to oats and barley) and the cob readily broke into small fragments. Additionally, the grain generally developed near the top of the plant. Over a period of thousands of years, Mesoamerican natives improved the crop by systematically selecting for desired traits which has led to the present day appearance of corn.



Teosinte plant.

(teosinte photos by Hugh Iltis)